

Information and Revolution



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KEY FINDINGS

- Technical literacy is a key factor when assessing the impact of information technology on democratization.
- Authoritarian regimes with a high level of technical literacy, as compared to their population, are less likely to go through democratic transitions.
- However, regimes with technical literacy lower than their population are more likely to experience democratic transitions.

The development of information and communications technology (ICT) has been a defining feature of the 20th century. However, its effect on democratization has been a source of disagreement. In a recent working paper (WP 50) for the Varieties of Democracy Institute (V-Dem), Steven Lloyd Wilson addresses this puzzle by introducing relative technical literacy (RTL) as an explanatory factor for the diverging impacts. This policy brief presents the key findings of his working paper, as well as some policy implications based on the new insights.

Overview

What is the effect of the Internet upon the prospects for democracy? On the one hand, ICTs were hailed as having the potential to be “liberation technology”, enabling individuals to solve collective action problems and resist authoritarian regimes (Diamond, 2010). Conversely, other scholars have argued that ICT expansion also allows authoritarian regimes to control their populations, pointing out the positive correlation between repressive regimes and internet expansion, as well as highlighting empirical insights that go against the initial theoretical assumptions (Rød and Weidmann, 2015). In WP 50, the author argues that both of these theories are flawed. Instead, the key to understanding the effect of ICT on democratization is the interplay between the technical literacy of the population, and the technical literacy of the regime. By taking this factor into account, one can get a better understanding of how certain

regimes can utilize ICTs to stay in power, but also how a technically literate population can cause democratic transitions.

Internet and Democratization: Illuminating the Mechanism

For authoritarian states, ICTs present a dilemma. While an expansion can deliver benefits, such as limiting public dissent and increasing economic growth, it also makes it easier for the population to organize and potentially revolt. In order to reap the rewards, whilst also limiting the potential subversive effects of ICTs, the author of WP 50 argues that autocracies need a specific form of state capacity – namely regime technical literacy (RTL). Conversely, population technical literacy (PTL) enables the population to take advantage of ICTs (WP50: 3). By understanding the interplay between these two factors, that is, the relative difference between them, one can better gauge the impact of ICT development on democratization.

So how does relative technical literacy impact democratization? Firstly, the author of WP 50 finds that if the state has a higher level of technical literacy than its population, democratic transition is significantly less likely to occur. Secondly, the level of electoral democracy is likewise significantly lower, as measured by V-Dem’s Polyarchy Index. This index shows to what extent the electoral principle of democracy is achieved,

TABLE 1. DEMOCRATIC AND AUTOCRATIC CHANGE IN AUTOCRACIES (2000-2013), BY RELATIVE TECHNICAL LITERACY.

	Democratic Transition	Authoritarian Transition	No Transition
Above median:	3 states Haiti, Tunisia, Yugoslavia	2 states Egypt, Morocco	23 states, e.g. China, Iran, Russia
Below median:	13 states, e.g. Lebanon, Thailand, Ukraine	8 states, e.g. Malaysia, Kyrgyzstan, Libya	27 states, e.g. Botswana, Laos, N. Korea

Note: Democratic and authoritarian transition refers to the regime type after the breakdown of an autocratic regime.

and aggregates multiple indices from the V-Dem dataset, in accordance with Robert Dahl's conceptualization of polyarchy (Coppedge et al., 2016). In line with the theoretical expectations, if the state has a lower level of technical literacy than its population, democratization is more likely. Additionally, when regime change happens, transitions in states with a high technical literacy are more violent, because they have a greater capacity to repress non-violent opposition (WP50: 19).

Contemporary Cases of Autocratic Regime (In)-Stability

Wilson illustrates his point further by analyzing regime change in autocracies (2000 to 2013) grouped by differences in relative technical literacy. Only five out of 26 regime changes in autocratic settings have taken place in states that possess a relatively high level of technical literacy (Table 1).

In addition, the countries in the top right cell exemplify some of the states that are considered to have the most sophisticated tools to deal with an increasingly technically literate population. The stability of these regimes can be seen as an indication of the mechanism at work. China — as the prototypical case of a state with a high technical literacy — has used its powers to selectively respond to popular demands that do not threaten the regime at large (WP 50: 23). This insight is in line with earlier findings on the sophisticated nature of Chinese Internet censorship (e.g., King et al, 2013). Additionally, both Russia and Iran share many characteristics of the Chinese regime's nuanced approach to ICTs, and have the capacity to utilize technological developments to stay in power. Concluding WP 50, the author points out the irony in how the Internet, often seen as offering people a voice, can also be utilized by tech-savvy dictators to cling to power.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- ICT support to autocratic regimes might hinder democratic development, particularly if the regime already has a high level of technical literacy.
- Conversely, empowering citizens in an authoritarian state to use ICTs can increase the chance of a democratic transition.
- When authoritarian regimes with a high technical literacy fall, it is crucial to effectively deal with the high risk of a violent breakdown.
- Taken together, these policy implications stress an understanding of country-specific factors when assessing the right course of action.

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